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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000540

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SUBJECT: IRANIAN AND IRAQI INFLUENCE IN THE SHI'A SUBURB OF  
SAYEDA ZEINAB

REF: DAMASCUS 00162

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On May 21, Emboffs visited the predominantly Shi'a suburb of Sayeda Zeinab located on the outskirts of Damascus. An important pilgrimage site for Shi'a Muslims, Iranians have long played an influential role in the area, providing both financial and religious support. More recently, the city has also become home to a large and growing number of predominantly Iraqi Shi'a refugees, a major component of the 1.5 million Iraqi refugees, whom Syrians view as an increasing burden. There are rumors in Damascus that this Shi'a stronghold is a potential breeding ground for Islamic radicals, with anecdotes of hostage-taking and other violent acts becoming more commonplace. End Summary.

¶2. (U) SHRINE ATTRACTS SHI'A DONATIONS: Sayeda Zeinab is a densely populated suburb, composed mainly of Iraqi (Shi'a) refugees, located on the outskirts of Damascus. Sayeda Zeinab has long been an important pilgrimage site for visiting Shi'a Muslims because according to religious tradition it hosts the shrine and tomb of Sayeda Zeinab, granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammed. During a May 21 visit, the manager of the Sayeda Zeinab shrine, Jamil Al-Shekh, gave Emboffs a tour. The Director said the Former SARG Minister of Higher Education, Hani Murtada (the most prominent Shi'a in Asad's cabinet when he served as minister from 2003-6), and his brother, are the joint custodians of the shrine. In the 1980's, the Murtada family - accepted by Shi'a in Syria to be direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammad - renovated the shrine with the help of Iranian financing. The Director said the shrine continues to receive large cash and in-kind donations from individual Shi'a donors, mentioning a recent private Pakistani donation of a USD 20,000 cloth to cover the tomb. During the visit Emboffs noted that the women's section was full of women and children, many shrouded in Iraqi and Iranian style coverings, who appeared involved in various social activities as well as in prayer. The men's section was noticeably quieter and the Director acknowledged that except for religious occasions ) such as Ashura - women were more constant devotees of the shrine.

¶3. (U) LONG-TERM IRANIAN INFLUENCE: As the site of an important Shi'a shrine, Sayeda Zeinab has a long history of Iranian influence. Iranian pilgrims started flooding to the city in large numbers in the late seventies. Today, several hundred thousand Iranian pilgrims are estimated to visit the area each year. The large number of Iranian pilgrims has encouraged the area's development, with Syrian investors constructing large apartment buildings and other facilities

to accommodate the influx of visitors. A prominent Syrian Shi'a businessman, Saeb Nahas, established a tourism company that organizes pilgrimage visits ) with financing from the Iranian government - from Iran to Damascus at an estimated rate of 2,000 per week. Nahas also built the only quasi-luxury hotel in the area, the Safir. Emboffs noted the visible Iranian influence, including a large "Ayatollah Khomeini<sup>8</sup> hospital that was built some ten or more years ago with at least partial funding from the Iranian government ) it also prominently featured the Ayatollah's photo. Additionally, there were more than a few Iranian sponsored religious schools located throughout the community.

14. (C) RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN CRAMPED QUARTERS: The predominance of tourism was evident in the large number of hotels, restaurants, and religious stores and schools that peppered the community. The town is more than 90 percent Shi'a and appeared conservative in comparison to other sections of Damascus - almost without exception women in the area wore the Hijab, with many in the more conservative Iranian Chador. The area was bustling with tour buses and locals out buying items from well-stocked shelves. Considering the number of wealthy religious tourists who visit the shrine, however, the area was noticeably poorer than other districts in Damascus. There is a significant amount of construction in the city, but it appeared shoddy and unplanned. There were also no public parks of note or other clearly identifiable public spaces where residents could escape from presumably cramped quarters in rental flats.

15. (C) GROWING BURDEN OF IRAQI REFUGEES: In addition to its connection with Iran, Sayeda Zeinab has recently received notoriety for its hosting of a large number of Iraqi Shi'a

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refugees. Past estimates placed the suburb's Syrian population at around 200,000, but an additional 400,000 to 600,000 Iraqi Shi'as are now rumored to have moved to the area ) a tripling of the population, and in effect transforming this "suburb" into a city. As a testament to the number of Iraqis in the area, more than 75 percent of the cars at the Sayeda Zeinab shrine had Iraqi license plates. The sudden large influx of Iraqis has been noticeable and Sayeda Zeinab is often described in the local media as a & little Baghdad.<sup>8</sup> Damascenes complain that Iraqi refugees have caused rental prices in the area to increase as much as 300 percent over the last couple of years. In addition, while the local media has focused more on increased crime due to Iraqis in Jeremana (a predominantly Druze and Christian suburb which has received a large influx of Iraqi Christian refugees), crime rates are also rumored to have increased in Sayeda Zeinab. An embassy contact asserted, however, that violence in Sayeda Zeinab has so far been contained by the various Iraqi Shi'a sheikhs who have accompanied the high influx and are exerting a powerful influence.

16. (C) BREEDING GROUND FOR RADICALS?: Rumors heard around Damascus portray Sayeda Zeinab as a breeding ground for Islamic radicalism and crime, with anecdotes of hostage-taking and other violent acts becoming more commonplace. Considering this, it was noticeable that there was not an overt SARG security presence in the area when Emboffs visited ) certainly less than in other parts of Damascus. Contacts report, however, that the SARG does send significant security forces to the area during various Shi'a religious celebrations. The increasingly active Shi'a groups also inspired Prominent Sunni sheikh, Salah Kuftaro, to complain recently to the SARG about the eight Iraqi Shi'a religious offices that were allowed to open in the area, viewing the development as one sign of increasing Shi'a-ization in the country (ref A). Iraqi Shi'a leader Moqtada al Sadr is also said to have an office in Sayeda Zeinab, maintained by a local representative, although Emboffs only saw a few posters of Sadr in the city. In March 2007, there were also local media reports that the SARG

arrested a Sayeda Zeinab-based fundamentalist group planning terrorist attacks in the region.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: If estimates of the size of the Iraqi population in Sayeda Zeinab are true, we presume that many are living in severely cramped rental quarters. Embodiments were struck by the relative serenity in the shrine and by the chaos and lack of public space everywhere else in the area. We expect that the summer months will bring an additional influx of Iraqi and Iranian Shi'a tourists to the area, further straining Sayeda Zeinab's capacity and sending prices - and tensions - even higher, at least temporarily.

CORBIN